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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a single assistant principal, her world and work. It examines the actions and feelings of the person in the assistant principal position, the way that person saw and managed the job, and how that person affects, and is affected by, the job. Operating as a "participant as observer," the assistant principal kept a comprehensive diary of her activities during her first year on the job. She teamed with an outside observer, and the two met weekly to discuss diary entries and to probe her interpretations of events. The essay discusses the background of the assistant principal, who is an African-American, and the context of her hiring. It also offers a detailed picture of the assistant principal's professional and private lives, offering examples of how she handles herself in the public and private spheres. Following an overview of the themes that dominate the work of the assistant principal, the results of the study are presented. The findings suggest that although the principal sets the assistant principal's agenda, the implication that the assistant principal has little opportunity to exercise control over the position may be inaccurate. (Contains 33 references.) (RJM)

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Through the Looking Glass: An Up Front and Personal Look at the World of the Assistant Principal

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Through the Looking Glass: An Up Front and Personal Look at the World of the Assistant Principal

While a great deal has been written about principals -- what they do and how they do it (cf: Greenfield, 1995; Kmetz & Willower, 1984;Mintzberg, 1973; Morris et al., 1984; Rosenblum et al, 1994) -- and the critical leadership role they play in schools (cf: Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Edmonds, 1979; Fullan, 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Murphy, 1990), comparatively little has been written about the assistant principal. Indeed, as Marshall (1991) has cogently observed, the position has been virtually ignored. The assistant principal is the "neglected actor in practitioner literature" (Hartzell, 1993).

The position emerged at the turn of the century as secondary school enrollments increased and the responsibilities of principals, particularly in larger and consolidated schools, increased. The position derived from a response to a need, without clear direction (Hentges, 1976), and the evolution of the role owes more to "expediency than...careful planning (Gearing, 1966, 9)." Existing research on the position has focused on assistant principals' duties, used as a synonym for roles, and the degree to which they exercise authority for those roles. Studies over a long period of time show marked increases in their duties, some commonality, but little uniformity in duties (Hayes, 1986), and little change in the last fifty years in the limits to the authority they exercise (Brottman, 1981). Even where the local school district dictates the duties incumbent on the position, the assignment of duties is largely left to the principal, as it has been since the inception of the position (Brottman, 1981; Jacobson et al., 1973). "The role of the assistant principal in the day-to-day administration of the school is some combination of that which is *assigned*, *expected*, and *assumed* (NASSP,1991,1)." And it is not just the obvious roles that remain ambiguous, but the vast array of "unwritten tasks and roles (Marshall, 1993)" that assistant principals play.

Marshall (1991) has stressed the need to understand the assistant principal's role, understand it in ways that allow for both a clear conceptualization of the role, and consideration of ways that the role might be reconceptualized within new and emerging paradigms of school leadership. What is needed but absent from the literature, is a sense of the whole: not merely what it is the assistant principal does, but how the assistant principal comes to do what s/he does; how s/he "sees" and manages the position; how s/he thinks about what s/he sees and does; and how s/he interacts with the other players in the environment and with the environment itself. And perhaps most importantly, how the person in the position affects and is affected by the position. Greenfield (1995), in considering where we are with respect to the development of theory in school administration, has championed a cognitive studies approach to the study of leadership to provide the knowledge needed to develop "a basis for more powerful theories about school administration (80)." In particular, he has identified a need for studies that focus on "the personal qualities of school administrators...(their) intentions, values, motives, expertise, needs, and capabilities as people (76)," and how these operate and interact with the environment in which they occur. It is within this context and out of these identified needs that the study grew.

PURPOSE AND METHOD

The purpose of the study was to describe the world and work of the assistant principal by focusing on a single assistant principal and applying multiple methods of studying that world and work, from within and without, to create a "situated portrayal(s) (Gronn & Ribbins, 1996)." The researchers, a university-based administrator preparer (the outsider) and a newly appointed assistant principal (the insider) teamed up to realize the purpose of the study. Operating as a "participant as observer," the assistant principal kept a comprehensive diary of her activities during the first year, making notations about how she felt and saw the various situations and interactions she experienced. Weekly, the two researchers met to discuss the events, experiences, and perceptions the assistant principal had logged, to explore how she, the insider, thought about what had happened, and to probe why she perceived she had done what she did. During the year, the outsider observed the assistant principal in action one day a month (8 days), collecting data about what the assistant principal said and did, to and with whom, when and where, ethnographically, in the tradition of cultural anthropologists (cf: Becker, 1970; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Whyte, 1955; Wolcott, 1973). Before moving into the position, the assistant principal appointee was intensively interviewed over a two day period about her background, experiences, expectations, intentions, perceptions of the role, and espoused values. Further, the principals under whom she served (2) were interviewed about their perceptions of the role and work of an assistant principal (each had served in that capacity before becoming principals), and the way in which the assistant principal under study went about the work of being an assistant principal. In addition, they were asked about the extent to which they perceived she did that they said and shared their values and vision for the school.

Given the intimate nature of the collaboration, it is incumbent on us to delineate the nature of our relationship and the potential benefits and limitations it imposes on the study. The researchers have a long-standing, evolving relationship, beginning as professor-student (the outsider was the insider's doctoral advisor), moving to co-researchers (conducting and presenting research together), and subsequently, research partners. We have worked together over a number of years, conceiving, conducting and presenting research; analyzing and interpreting data --- and arguing out the meanings and implication of such data; and challenging (vigorously) each other's thinking and biases. We have found ways of working together that allow a "no hold's bared" approach undergirded by respect for one another. In terms of the current study, the relationship allows for a level of understanding not normally shared by the researcher and subject of that research. The outsider knows the insider well; knows her as person and professional. Because of their long-standing relationship, the outsider has access to the insider's inner thoughts and beliefs, and the leeway to explore them with her; and the insider is comfortable with telling the insider "that's not exactly how it is," and proceeding to tell how it really is to/for her. Thus the study represents a true collaboration and is incomparably enriched by the nature of the relationship. By the same token, the nature of the relationship raises questions about the

ease with which bias might creep into the research, consciously or unconsciously, particularly in a study focusing on one of the researchers. As might be expected, we believe we have been extremely alert to the possibility of bias, and have avoided such an egregious error. Realistically, the possibility of such bias does exist and may well have crept into the portrayal. The reader/listener is forewarned and the authors are responsible for supporting and defending their portrayal with appropriate and sufficient evidence.

The study generated a mass of extremely rich data of which the researchers, as a team, us[illegible]ontextual analysis, attempted to make sense and to use to create the portrait of the [illegible] principal's reality. During the study, each of the researchers read the material g[illegible]d in a casual search for possible patterns and categories, allowing for widening the [illegible] with which each continued to collect subsequent data. Further, the emerging pat[illegible]s and categories were tested and rejected against continually accumulating data. At mid-point in the study and at the end, all of the data were systematically reexamined by each researcher before coming together to identify and argue out "the repetitive refrains, the persistent themes (Lightfoot, 1983, 15)" emerging from the data that were used to code and make sense of them. It was from these patterns and themes, and with the constant interaction of the insider and outsider in building the portrait, that the portrait of the assistant principal's world and work was built. At every point the assistant principal was an integral part of the process, and everything in the portrait represents what the assistant principal perceives and acknowledges.

The portrait that emerged was complex and multi-faceted, and the assistant principal saw it as a mirror being held up to her face--a mirror that allowed her to look at herself as others might see her, and step inside the mirror and view herself beyond the image. The data were equally fruitful in suggesting themes about the world and work of the assistant principal. While the thematic findings are limited to the individual studied, they pose intriguing questions for future research, and if not idiosyncratic to the individual studied, have critical implications for our understanding of both the position and school leadership.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Assistant Principal is a native of Knoxville, a product of the local school system (the city school system before its incorporation into the county system), and of the locally-situated flagship state university. She holds four degrees, three of them in education: a B.S. in liberal arts, an MS in educational administration (principal certification), an Ed.S. in curriculum and instruction, and a Ph.D. in educational administration. She continues to take courses and attend workshops in a variety of school-related areas. She began teaching in the old city school system in 1970, in the school she now serves as assistant principal. The school serves, as it did then, the majority of African-American high school students in the city and until the introduction of magnet students, contained very few Caucasian students. It was a school of choice for her, i.e., she asked to be placed there,

but it was not and is not now a school of choice for many teachers. With brief stints at two junior high schools, she stayed at the high school for 16 years, teaching, among other things, Spanish, Art, English, and the social sciences; coaching tennis and softball; and sponsoring the yearbook, the newspaper, the chess club, and senior activities. After a 2 ½ year leave of absence to complete her doctoral program, she returned to the system to teach in a specially-created high school for dropouts. Five years later she moved into the position of facilitator for the new middle school magnet and proposed magnet high school. The district had begun magnet schools in response to a need to foster desegregation. The magnet schools were built on a school-within-a- school concept, and each of the magnet schools was in an inner-city location. The elementary school magnets had been in operation for a few years, but the secondary magnets were new. When one of the assistant principals of the middle school magnet left mid-year, she was appointed assistant principal. The following Fall she was asked to move to the high school, the same one in which she had taught for 16 years, to serve as assistant principal for curriculum to help usher in the new magnet program. The study encompasses the year from her entrance into the position in the middle school through the first six months plus of her work at the high school.

Both schools are located in what is considered to be the inner-city, serve a largely Afro-American student population (exclusive of the Caucasian magnet students), and are the primary secondary schools serving the inner-city communities. The middle school serves 623 students, 80% African-American; the high school 736 students, 93% African-American. While there is diversity in the socio-economic status of the communities served by the schools, the schools draw large numbers of students from poor families. Eighty-five percent of the students are eligible for free lunch, down from 90% before the introduction of magnet students. Both schools have histories of "problems": student behavior problems; low test scores; teacher dissatisfaction; administrator turnover.

The magnet component added Caucasian students to the school population, as well as out-of-zone black African-American. The students had chosen to come to the magnet and were bused into the school from surrounding suburban areas. In order to meet the academic needs of these students, they were largely segregated in classes with other magnet students for core subjects, and integrated with the residential population for all other classes, particularly in the specialized magnet offerings. As magnet schools, the schools received additional teachers who also served the residential population, and additional funding to fulfill their mandate as magnet schools. At the time of the study, while having its schools renovated and receiving additional resources was a source of some pleasure, there was considerable resentment in the schools and community about the wellspring of those benefits ("Why is it they don't put money into our schools when it's just black students?") and the benefits largely accruing to magnet students.

The principal of the middle school is an African-American female who came to the school after one year as an assistant principal in the school in which she had been a long-time

teacher, and one year as assistant principal in the high school in which this study is situated. She is a prominent member of the African-American community and the wife of a local bishop. She was appointed to the principal's position following the reassignment of the former principal, also an African-American female. Despite the size of the school, she has two assistant principals, one ostensibly for traditional assistant principal duties and the other to serve the magnet. At the current time, both positions are held by males, one African-American, one Caucasian.

The principal of the high school, who is in his first year as a principal, is an African-American male. He came to the high school from 6 years as an assistant principal at a majority Caucasian high school where he had taught before his appointment to administration. He was a former football coach and administrator at a local, historically-black college. Unlike his counterpart in the middle school and his predecessor at the high school, also an African-American female prominent in the school community, he is not an identified member of that community. At the beginning of the study he had three assistant principals. One, a Caucasian male, was a long-termer, having started his career at the same time as the subject of the study. He served as librarian, initially, and this was the third principal he was serving under as an assistant principal. Another was an African-American female who had come to the position the year before with no experience in high school. She had been an elementary school guidance counselor. The previous year, the third assistant principal had been an African-American male who had been recruited from out-of-state where he was a high school coach. He was moved to the school from which the new principal had come to replace him as one of their four assistant principals. The subject of the study was brought in to fill his "slot," although the position was designated as assistant principal for curriculum and the magnet. As events unfolded, an additional assistant principal was appointed mid-year, an African-American male who had been teaching and coaching in the middle school, to help "handle the discipline load."

PORTRAIT OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

The assistant principal was known by a number of names during her career. When she had first taught at the high school the staff called her Mac, and the students, Mrs. McNeely. At the middle school, the magnet students called her Dr. Sonja and the principal called her Doc. At the high school, the former middle school magnet students called her Dr. Sonja, old staff members called her Mac, and residential students called her Mrs. Dr. McNeely. Mac, as we will refer to her in this paper, is best understood in terms of the two personas that characterize the person she is; the one a public/professional persona; the other, a private/personal persona. Mac's public persona ---the one people see and respond to in the school, in SAMS or T.J. MAXX , where former students yell across the aisles, "Mrs. McNeely, Mrs. McNeely," and in situations she defines as related to her work in the school --- is characterized by energy and ebullience. She appears unfailingly sociable (easy about small talk and ready to tell you about her husband and her dog), and

amiable (How's your day going?, stopping to listen). She is both playful, ready with a quip or a comment, and considerate, remembering birthdays, sick parents, occasions, bringing biscuits to one of the other assistant principals, and always having candy for students or staff. She speaks rapidly, animatedly, enthusiasm radiating from her face and energy radiating from her every gesture. She is most often seen moving around the school (both schools). She moves quickly and energetically through the halls and corridors, smiling readily and greeting students, staff and visitors heartily, by name if she knows it. She stops to talk with everyone, especially students—if she's not on a mission to catch a student wandering around the cavernous hallways of the high school or slipping out one of the many side doors—asking how they are, what's doing, passing on a message, or reminding them to stop by and get something from her office (a letter to take home, their schedule, a mint from the always-filled jar on her desk.) And she projects a strong, confident, can-do attitude in voice and manner. This public persona is the face she shows to the world at large when she perceives herself "doing her job." The public persona is so different from the private persona that it may at first seem "put on", fake. It is too upbeat, too unfailingly voluble, too energetic. But since it is consistently what you see, it comes to be reality. Almost no one would describe her as anything but an extravert, a people person. That she is not would surprise them. It is not that she "puts on" a face in the usual sense of taking on behaviors that may be different from what one is or believes in order to deceive. Rather, she becomes the person she perceives is essential to doing and being what is needed and appropriate to the job.

The private persona stands in marked contrast to this public one. She is intensely private, quiet, and reserved. She is extremely principled and reflective, has strong, well-thought out educational beliefs and values which she keeps largely to herself—although they may be seen in the way she deals with problems---and spends a good deal of time thinking about ideas and understandings. She is governed by a strong sense of responsibility to her job and what she conceptualizes that to be, and it is a dominant value guiding her behavior. She is passionate about what she sees as the role and responsibilities schools have for and with students, and feels crushing disappointment when those responsibilities are not fulfilled. She is highly resilient and self-reliant and dislikes either asking for help or working with groups. Few people know this private persona, and it is rarely seen in a public realm, however, it does sometimes emerge in public. And amazingly, when this persona emerges in public, e.g., at administrative meetings downtown, or in social situations not directly related to school, or at meetings such as these, she has the ability to fade into the background. She is virtually motionless, expressionless. She attracts no attention and does nothing to attract attention. She appears to be nothing like the person she is in school. (Those who are conversant with the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator will not be surprised to learn she is a very strong Introvert—indeed she scores O on the Extravert scale. And as it is said of Introverts, the person they are is not necessarily the person you see.) In reflecting on this seeming transformation, she claims that it is not something she does consciously, but it does allow her to watch what is going on, and watching what is going on, "seeing" and "making meaning" out of what is going on, is a dominant theme of

her private persona. The dichotomy between her public and private personas may help to explain why it took her so long to become an administrator. Her "public" is associated with the job; the "public" associated with administrative advancement is not defined by her as "public."

The confluence of her public and private personas may be seen in the way Mac operates in school. Although the public persona characterizes her outward behavior, in the way she approaches and deals with situations, it is the private persona that is brought to bear. She rarely raises her voice, never gets visibly angry or lashes out, even under what might seem strong provocation (testified to by students and staff). She is perceived to be honest and to be a person who keeps her word. Her approach to most situations is to listen carefully, ask questions rather than make pronouncements, and speak about possibilities and alternatives. She has the ability to suspend judgment and to approach situations in the school in a problem-solving mode; and unlike many, she doesn't take things personally. She has an uncanny ability to manage difficult situations, from fights in the cafeteria to heartbreak in the stairwells; from parents demanding exceptions to students facing expulsion. And she generally leaves the persons less angry, less aggrieved, and better able to see and accept reality.

A student had incensed both her teacher and classmates by drawing symbols everywhere on her papers and notebook. The teacher demanded that the student not bring her notebook to class, and had written a discipline referral on the student when she defied this demand. The student contended that the drawings were of Celtic symbols; her classmates, that they were signs of devil worshiping. Both the teacher and students wanted her to stop displaying the symbols on her notebooks. In conversations with the student's parents about what was happening, the assistant principal found the parents to be adamant about their daughter's right to take her notebook to class; that these were religious symbols and she had a right to have these on her notebook, just as other students wore religious symbols around their necks. The assistant principal recognized that the matter was one of principle for them, their daughter's civil rights. At the same time she recognized that the situation was different for the teacher and the students who were complaining. For them, the symbols were a source of contentiousness and provocation, not a matter of rights. In speaking to the parents, Mac acknowledged the parent's position, and told them --- and the student--- she would support them in this position. She did, however, discuss with them the other perspective that was involved --- how it was seen by the teacher and other students, why they might think as they did. The result was that the parents and student recognized that what they were protesting had little to do with what fed the response of those opposed to the behavior; that there was another way of viewing the situation than the one they had; and decided it might be best if the student stopped drawing those symbols on her notebook. Mac also bought the student a new notebook.

In another, far more incendiary situation, a student came rushing at Mac screaming that there was a fight in the art room. The assistant principal ran downstairs to find the teacher

on J's back, trying to pull him away and M on the floor, pinned down by J who had his foot on the side of his throat. J was clearly enraged and was screaming and cursing at the student he had pinned down. The assistant principal knew both of the young men involved. J was physically large, a senior and a football player. M, in contrast, was physically slight, a second-year freshman, basically on his own and secretive. What later emerged was that there had been a history of remarks between the two that erupted again near the end of class. The teacher spoke to the two, and J, the senior, then threatened to harm M, the freshman, after class. M then picked up a large brass lamp, walked over to where J was standing and hit him in the head as hard as he could, and the fight was on. The teacher stepped in to break it up, but was not successful. That was when the teacher yelled for a student to get help. When the assistant principal arrived, she went over to J and gently put one hand lightly on his shoulder, very lightly, and very gently put one hand on the same arm. Quietly, very quietly, so it could hardly be heard by the observer, she said, "J," using his name, "this is not what you want. You're a senior, J. You're going to graduate. You're not in trouble right now, J. You were protecting yourself. But you have to let him go, J. J. you're going to have to let him go." She kept repeating these things or a variant of them quietly, but continuously. The cursing gradually diminished and in what she later said felt like 10 minutes, but was actually a little more than two minutes, he looked at her and let M. up. (Later he said to her, "I did that for you.") He backed off, moving toward and through the classroom door. As she watched him, she barely turned in time to see M, brass lamp in hand, coming after J, cursing and screaming. She stepped in front of his on-rush, grabbed him in a hug, held him and started to rub his back (physically, they were similar in size, although he could have hurt her if he chose, particularly since he was clearly enraged.) Again, as with J, she spoke quietly, very quietly, and repetitively, as she held him and rubbed his back, "M, it's over. You need to put down the lamp. It's all rights. Don't make it worse." Again, in what seemed like a lifetime, but turned out to be about 45 seconds, M drooped against her, dropped the lamp, and began to cry. Mac continued to hold him for a long while.

These examples illustrate the way in which the assistant principal goes about her work. They also illuminate the degree to which her espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris, 1990) are correlated.

THE WORK OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

Mac did somewhat different things in each school, but it must be kept in mind that she came into the middle school mid-year, with a principal who had been there since September; and she came into the high school at the beginning of the school year with a new principal. While discipline was a part of each situation, it was a minor task in the middle school. The school had an assistant principal for discipline and Mac had only to deal with discipline for and with special education students. In the high school, at least until the appointment of an additional assistant principal, discipline was not merely the

dominant task, it was the only one. Every minute of every day was consumed with discipline and discipline-related matters: handling teacher referrals---on average 25 a day, (i.e., following up with each student referred; managing on average 10 suspensions each day. The suspension file for the first semester was 1 ½ inches thick); holding disciplinary meetings with parents and students; supervising 3 lunch periods, 2 hours a day, with the other female assistant principal; "patrolling the halls," clearing them of students/chasing students down the halls, before and during each class period, also with the other female assistant principal. Once the additional assistant principal was added specifically for discipline, the disciplinary load abated considerably. While Mac still had responsibility for 11 th grade discipline and the attendant meetings and responsibilities (approximately 1 ½ hours a day), for supervising one lunch period, and for checking the halls, discipline was no longer the sole and consuming task it once was. She had time for other tasks, as she had had at the middle school, tasks more in keeping with her designation as "curriculum and magnet principal." She was no less busy, but she was busy at different things.

In both schools, the assistant principal scheduled all of the students. She not only constructed the master schedule, meeting with departments and students to plan offerings, something that had not been done before and was a source of considerable teacher unrest, but hand-scheduled all students. (This had been the responsibility of one of the other assistant principals at the high school. He had delegated all of it save the master schedule to the guidance department. Their efforts had proven so unsatisfactory, for teachers and for students, the task was assumed by Mac, with approval from the principal and downtown, first for the magnet students and then for all students.) In the high school, she met with magnet students and their parents in individual conferences (1-2 ½ hours each) before constructing each magnet student's schedule in order to discuss the student's progress and future hope and plans, as well as upcoming schedules. Also, in her designated role as magnet principal, the assistant principal gave almost daily tours of the facility for prospective magnet students and their parents, a major undertaking in the high school, responded to all calls and questions about the magnet school from parents of current students and interested parties, was a liaison to possible feeder schools, attended all meetings and public relations events related to the magnet schools, and was general facilitator and troubleshooter with the magnet teachers and students.

In the middle school Mac was responsible for special education compliance and discipline and the principal delegated every written report (state and local) to her. In the high school she was sent to virtually every meeting for principals (delegated by the principal) and every workshop, and was asked to coordinate all events at which the school served as host to the district or community. To address the large failure rate of ninth graders, she is planning a special program for those ninth graders most at-risk to be instituted in the Fall.

Beyond what was assigned, expected and assumed by her, where time permitted, she spent time with students and teachers. At the middle school, she spent the first hour of each day, every day, greeting teachers and students as they came into the building (there

was only one building entrance), and another hour or more each day speaking to teachers who came by to talk, let off steam, or ask her to talk with a student or parent; dropping into classrooms to see what teachers and students were doing; and meeting with students who needed a word or two or some extra support. While she tried to do this in the high school, circumstances made it almost impossible. As the pressure to manage discipline became less all-consuming, she made more of an effort to drop into classrooms and to visit with the magnet students, but she continually decried the lack of time to do these things in the way in which she wished

The assistant principal and the principals for whom she worked held basically the same view of the role of the assistant principal, i.e., to serve the principal; to realize the principal's vision of the school. "The principal is like the head coach," said the principal of the high school, "the assistant principal's job is to realize the principal's plan." Mac believed an assistant principal must be committed to and supportive of the principal, good or bad, and should never undermine her/him. Also, an assistant principal should be honest with the principal and keep him/her informed about what was going on. However, while both principals were talking about some form of loyalty and the presentation of a united front before others and honesty in private, for all of which they prized Mac, her sense of what this was about went beyond this. There was a presumption about the role of the principal undergirding the responsibility to serve rather than a discreet acceptance of service for service sake. She believed that the principal should have a vision of what school is about, of where s/he wanted the school to go, of what to do and how to do it to get there, which s/he then let everyone know. Serving the principal, then, related to helping him/her to realize that vision, even if she did not agree with that vision. She maintained that if she were asked to do something unethical or illegal or to help realize a vision that was clearly harmful to students, she would refuse ---she hoped gracefully, but, "push come to shove," she was willing to lose her job over it.

It is this that was different for the assistant principal and her sense of control and accomplishment in the two schools. While she did not necessarily share the middle-school principals's vision for the school, the principal had a vision which guided her actions. The principal operated out of her vision and her actions and reactions were predictable. "I knew what I could and couldn't do, and when she told me something, I knew it would be so." It made it much easier to both control her time (she knew what was expected and required) and to "put closure on things I did." In the high school, while things are more under control than they were the first semester, the lack of direction (a vision, goals to be attained) from the principal ---and the perceived lack of follow-through, even with things the principal agrees are important, has left her feeling "unsettled," honestly questioning whether what she is doing is directed to any reasoned, relevant ends, and unclear about how what she is doing makes any contribution to the school beyond putting out fires or dealing with the immediate.

At first she attributed the principal's behavior to his being new in the school and wanting

and needing to take stock, however it has continued. Some examples from this semester illustrate this lack of follow-through. A faculty meeting was held at which specific rules for teacher behavior were discussed, e.g., be at your duty stations at 7:30 am; don't leave school during your planning period unless it is an emergency. Despite the fact that these and other rules are often violated, nothing has been done to call teachers to account. There has been no follow up, or any direction to the assistant principals to follow up. The students were very badly behaved in an assembly. Everyone, including the principal, agreed that this could not continue. The teachers and assistant principals said the students needed to be taught what to do, how to behave. The principal agreed. Nothing was done about it. In one two week period there were 7 food fights in the cafeteria. Nothing was done about the situation until the seventh one. When the assistant principal for discipline began, the principal said it was critical for at least one administrator (he meant assistant principals; he does not do lunch duty) to cover each lunch period. "If you can't be there, get another to cover." The new assistant principal no longer appears for lunch duty, nor does he get someone to cover. There are no repercussions. The principal has not even said anything to him. And what is perhaps most distressing for the assistant principal is the fact that nothing is being done to address the high student failure rate (more than 50%), and the "little evidence that learning is taking place."

It is not that Mac perceives that the high school principal is not doing anything. On the contrary, she perceives he works very hard. However, at what he works is less clear, and more pointedly, what he perceives it is important to do for the school is even less clear. It is hard to serve what is not known or predictable. "I don't feel as if the school is moving in any direction. It's just drifting." Thus, it is almost impossible for her to feel a sense of accomplishment or control in her job.

In spite of these thoughts and feelings, it is interesting to note that both principals see the assistant principal as sharing their values and vision for the school. "We're in tune," opined the high school principal. "She respects my perspective and I respect hers...We have the makings of a good team." And the middle school principal felt that she not only shared her values and visions but had helped her to fulfill that vision. "She really made a contribution and I wanted to keep her." And, each principal described her performance as excellent and characterized her as an ideal assistant principal. The middle school principal, reflecting on her performance shared:

> Doc was the ideal assistant principal. She's very intelligent, smart as a whip, but not arrogant. She's humble and uses her intelligence to do good things ...She's very intuitive, talented, balanced...She understood me... She built bridges to the administration. It was the right, respectful and good thing to do. She didn't have to.

And the high school principal echoed these sentiments:

> I can give her any task and she'll do it. I don't have to worry. I know it will get done...She's an ideal assistant principal, knowledgeable, doesn't mind taking advice, doesn't mind giving advice, sharing ideas. I don't know how long she'll be here. She's talented.

THEMES IN THE WORK OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

In what the assistant principal did and how her day was constructed, it would be difficult to distinguish the assistant principal from the principal as characterized in the literature. The "busy person syndrome," coined by Weldy (1979) to describe the principal, aptly described the assistant principal. She was busy almost "every second of every day." Most days not only was lunch not possible, but the biscuit she brought at 7 a.m. remained uneaten at 4 p.m. Her day was spent in a great number and variety of tasks characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1973), and she was rarely able to complete a task without interruption. However, unlike the principal, her tasks were assigned, and new tasks were frequently, often unexpectedly, added. While Martin and Willower (1981) have observed that principals "engage in the most current and pressing situations (80)," this went double for the assistant principal who was often the recipient of the principal's current and pressing situations.

As suggested in the literature, the assistant principal's job was "some combination of that which is assigned, expected and assumed (NASSP,1991,1). " While the assistant principal was appointed as the curriculum and magnet principal (assigned duties), what she did day- to- day owed more to the whim and perspective of the principal (expected duties) than to any designated duties. The tasks associated with her assigned duties were ill-defined and ambiguous at best. She was left to determine those as she would. The tasks assigned by the principal were specific, immediate and dominant. In order for her to meet the expectations of the principal to serve her/him, expectations she accepted, it was necessary to give priority to those tasks, even at the expense of her reason for being placed in the school, her sense of what needed to be done in the school (potential assumed duties) and her perception about the relative importance of the tasks assigned. It required the assistant principal to juggle her obligations in ways that sometimes left her frustrated and contributed to her sense of lack of accomplishment, at least at the beginning. However, over time, as she saw there was little accountability for *how* the tasks were done, or by whom, merely that they be done, and that "unless all hell breaks loose, however you do it is okay," she realized that the nature of the job allowed "a lot of leeway," and that even with specific tasks, e.g., discipline, "you define how and how much you do." Expectations for how you do the job are those of the person, not the position.

On the other hand, while tasks were assigned (by the principal), it became clear that the *roles* assumed were decided by the assistant principal, not by the assigned tasks or the

position. *She* defined the role(s) she would play and she fulfilled her tasks within the framework of that role/those roles. And the role(s) she assumed were directly related to her values, personal and educational. "A (another assistant principal in the building) and I try to get at the root of behavior, find out why it happened and make it not happen again; be an advocate for the kid. But B (another assistant principal) is on a power trip. Everything in the way B operates says, 'I'm in charge; I enforce the rules.' Similarly, while C, another assistant principal who used to be in charge of scheduling, never met with department heads or students about schedules, and used to leave the process mostly to guidance, Mac maneuvered to take on the "task" and to manage it in an entirely different way.

Despite the fact that the assistant principal had little control over the number and kinds of tasks assigned to her, and exercised sole authority over almost nothing, a finding already well-noted in the literature (Golanda, 1991; Marshall, 1993), within those limits she created a sphere of operation and control in which she played out her sense of rightness about what was good for the school and imposed her values, beliefs, personality and ways of dealing with things. As limiting as the position would seem to be, she exercised considerable authority in the way she constructed her reality and in the way her personal characteristics operated in that reality. "You try to make your own world—to get things to fit what you value, think is right and how it should be." After studying the principal and the situation, she moved to make changes in how and at what she spent her time. Good fortune played its part, and it would be foolish to attribute everything that happened solely to the efforts of the assistant principal. However, she was bent on altering the way she spent her time, and finding ways to be able to spend time in doing more of the things she thought were important, i.e., getting into classrooms; meeting the needs of the magnet students; trying to alter the failure rate amongst residential students. The addition of another assistant principal helped her to do this, but she also initiated efforts to articulate needs to the principal which she was willing to address, and to make decisions about setting limits on how she carried out some of the assigned tasks. Formerly, when the assistant principal assigned to cover the cafeteria failed to appear, Mac (and one of the other assistant principals) stayed to supervise the cafeteria. She felt that it was important for an administrator to be in the cafeteria and that it was not fair to leave it to the teachers that might or might not be there. In "redefining" her priorities, she covered her own cafeteria duty, but did not stay on unless asked specifically to cover another duty. More importantly, she began to use her understanding of the principal in both contexts, to frame things (she thought were important to do) in ways that would make sense to the principal, that were more likely to get her/his approval. And she made it a point to seek the principal's approval for every assumed task she wished to undertake.

The sphere of operation and control the assistant principal carved out for herself allowed her to derive meaning and purpose from her work, what Marshall calls the great "unanswered question" in the position (1993, 3). And to do so in ways that violated neither the cultural boundaries nor the unwritten rules for exercising authority discreetly. The risks

involved were undertaken "without causing major changes or inviting strong opposition" (Marshall, 1993, 43). The proof of the pudding is that both principals under whom she worked perceived that she did what *they* asked her to do, and believed that she shared their values and vision for the school. That was not at all how the assistant principal viewed it, nor did the accumulated data support such a conclusion. The assistant principal did do what she was asked to do, but the way in which she did it and how she operated revealed values and a vision for the school that were not consonant with those of the principals

IMPLICATIONS

The study attempted to get inside the world and work of one assistant principal; to see, in an up close and personal way, with the intimate collaboration of the person in the position, the way the assistant principal saw and managed the job and to consider how the person in the position affects and is affected by the position. Limited as it is to the study of one person, a person who may well not be typical of persons holding the position, in two school situations which might hardly been considered typical, working with two relatively new principals, themselves trying to find their way in their positions, it would be inappropriate, not to say impossible, to generalize from the findings to others in the position or to the position itself. The findings may prove to be idiosyncratic to the person studied and/or the situations in which she served as assistant principal. Nevertheless, the study raises intriguing questions about the position, and if the findings should subsequently prove to speak to the experiences of others in the position, the study may have interesting implications for conventional wisdom about the position.

While it appears to be quite true that the principal decides what the assistant principal will do, whether the tasks are assigned, expected or assumed, the implication that has long been drawn, that the assistant principal has little opportunity to exercise control over the position, or authority in the position, may not be accurate. On the contrary, assistant principals may have a much wider zone of control and authority than previously thought in their ability to define the roles they will play, to determine how they will go about realizing the tasks, and to set standards and conditions for fulfilling the tasks assigned. It may be that the ambiguity noted in the assistant principal's roles and tasks (Marshall, 1993) allows for this zone of control and authority. How this ambiguity is used, and whether or not it is recognized, depends more on the person who holds the position and the values s/he brings to the position.

The fact that Mac brought change to the position, but was not apparently changed by the position, raises intriguing questions about the influence of the position on the person and the ability of the individual to affect the position. It has long been posited that assistant principals are socialized into the position, i.e., they learn to conform to the norms and role, "either because those chosen for the positions are disposed to do so, or because the role

itself imposes on the individual, or both" (Mertz & McNeely, 1993, 11). It is true, as Marshall & Mitchell (1989) point out, that "The administrative culture selectively recruits and promotes only those who are *seen* as competent, desirable and fit (italics added)." It is also true that "Just as people behave according to others' expectations, they also behave according to the opportunities and requirements of their social and occupational roles" (Beall & Sternberg, 1993,22). Indeed, role theory has been identified as an important ingredient in explaining administrative behavior (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). The implications drawn from the twin notions of cultural selectivity and role theory suggest that if anyone changes, it is likely to be the person, not the role; that the role affects the person, but the person is extremely limited in her/his ability to affect the role. In truth, we have had little reason to question these notions. Our experiences in the field would seem to support them. Nevertheless, at least in this case, the assistant principal was indeed selected and did fit within the culture (or at least appeared to fit); however, she did not assume the values of that culture. Rather she retained and operated out of the values she brought to the position, and in so doing, influenced the position she held. Her ability to do this raises interesting questions about the operation of culture and role on the position, about the inevitability of their affect, and about the ability of the individual, not just one individual, to affect the position.

The notion of a zone of control and authority in which personal qualities are played out and the potential for discrepancy between the principal and the assistant principal(s) in the values and vision they hold, if they represent more than the single assistant principal studied, have intriguing implications for school leadership. The school is a reflection of the principal, at least superficially. It is the principal who sets the tone, the climate and the direction for the school. If, in the worlds over which they have authority, the assistant principals play out their vision, values and beliefs, and they are neither shared with the principal nor with each other (if more than one), the potential for disunity and failure increases markedly, and it might seem to be, *for no apparent reason.*

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